

WELCOME*

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HEALTH information forms a very important part in our lives if space devoted to it in the press and on radio and television is any criterion. There are many reasons for this. It comes as no surprise that everyone has a deep interest in matters of life and death. Because of modern medical research, many illnesses that at one time were highly incapacitating or fatal can now be prevented or treated, often with seemingly miraculous results. Consequently, the public expects to be kept informed of these developments as they unfold. The high cost of medical care as a result of modern technology also makes the delivery of health care an important economic issue. Finally, the recent trend for patients and their relatives to become more involved in medical decisions requires a much higher level of medical knowledge among laymen and stimulates the desire for more information, sometimes highly technical information.

As a result of these pressures and the responses of all the various sources of health information for laymen, the public has become more sophisticated about health matters than they ever have been before. This has sometimes raised the expectations of the public to an unrealistic level. It has also resulted, in some instances, to premature announcements and dissemination of only partially correct, or even incorrect, information. Occasionally sensationalism has taken over.

In planning for this conference on Diffusion of Health Information to the Public, the members of the Committee on Library of the Academy recognized the growing importance of health information for the public and many of the problems that are developing. These problems raise many questions. What does the public want to know and what are its real needs? How can we be sure that the public's needs are being met? Where does the public get its information and how can we be sure that correct, high quality information gets to the right people? Is it necessary or possible to maintain privacy

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in reporting on medical advances? What is the role of the various health care information providers? These and other questions are surely in our minds as we start this conference. We cannot expect to get all of them answered in the time allotted. However, we are fortunate in having such an excellent and highly qualified panel to address the issues.

First, I would like to acknowledge the help of Lois Lunin, one of the speakers, and of Burns Roper of The Roper Organization in developing the plans for the Conference. We are also indebted to the Commonwealth Fund for their financial contribution to the Conference and to the publication of the proceedings in the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*.